Peter’s Jhana Retreat Report

I don’t usually prepare notes regarding a recently experienced retreat for the customary reviewing talk we have established to provide folks with an opportunity to share their experiences after a significant retreat. The retreat I experienced from October 23 to November 2, 2023 has provided me with some important insights about Buddhist concepts and practices associated with the cultivation of very high degrees of mental concentration that I want to think through and present in helpful ways.

I gave a talk on October 19, 2023, just prior to the retreat that reviewed the concepts regarding jhana found within Buddhist doctrine, and a recording and notes can be found and reviewed in the website archives. What I want to describe here is the trajectory of the retreat experience and significant insights that solidified my experiential understanding of those concepts.

We had the option of sitting in the meditation hall or in our own rooms, only required to be in the hall for dhamma talks or Q & A sessions. I sat in my room, which had two beds. I set up my regular meditation cushion arrangement on one bed and constructed an arrangement on the other bed that could accommodate supporting my back, so I was sitting in a semi-reclining posture, with room enough for me to sleep at night. I began meditating a little more than 4 hours before breakfast so I could first meditate on my cushion for two hours and then on the recliner for two hours. I didn’t practice formal walking meditation but walked briskly and mindfully for probably two miles after each meal. I didn’t eat anything after lunch.

Shaila’s talks were very informative conceptually and supported skillful mindfulness of breathing meditation practice. She’s been teaching jhana retreats for about 20 years. She is a strong advocate of jhana as described in the Visuddhimagga, a key Theravada commentary on Buddhism, which was written more than 500 years after the time of the Buddha. Her teacher was the Pa Auk Sayadaw, and she intends to integrate what she learned from him into contemporary Western Buddhist communities. Her ability to describe the concepts and practices is exceptionally clear, and I am a very well-informed consumer of Western Buddhist concepts and practices.

There are different stages of mental concentration that were the focus of the retreat. The first was to establish physical stability and the intention to bring focused attention deliberately and repeatedly to the beginning of the experience of sensations noticeable around the rim of the nostrils and the upper lip, and then sustain this attention for the duration of the in- and then the out-breath persistently. This basic practice was emphasized each time Shaila provided a guided meditation.

The next goal involved dissolving any attachment to the arising of hindrances. We were encouraged to resist trying to “fight” with the mental event, but rather to notice its appearance as soon as possible and then go back to the breath. I know from my own practice that it helps to integrate body sensations and mental awareness of breathing with “letting go” of any urgent attachment during the out-breath to disregard thoughts that may arise. This quote from the Anapanasati Sutta (ah-nah-pah-nah-sah-tee soo-tah) describes the results of this practice:

“One trains: ‘experiencing mental activity I shall breathe in’; one trains: ‘experiencing mental activity I shall breathe out.’ One trains: ‘calming mental activity I shall breathe in’; one trains: ‘calming mental activity I shall breathe out.’”

As this process progresses, the breath becomes slower and more subtle, or sometimes feels like subtle “panting”, very shallow and short in duration. There are often times when the sensation of breathing seems to cease, which is an important step in the process of developing highly concentrated mindfulness of breathing meditation.

Shaila talked about the nimitta (nih-mih-tah) phenomenon. In Buddhist psychology, the moment each self-state organization forms, multiple times per second, the initial perception is called the nimitta or seed moment. The experience of selfing proliferates from that initial impulse. In the cultivation of jhana, a nimitta is a mental phenomenon, without awareness of any accompanying physical sensations. This supports a key function of insight practice called nama/rupa. Rupa is any physical sensation, and nama is any mental fabrication that arises that may be associated with the sensation. The process of Awakening progresses when we become directly aware of this distinction and shift attention away from attachment to any physical aspects of that moment of selfing and become increasingly aware of the conditional nature of what the mind creates.

In mindfulness of breathing meditation practice, preparatory to the entry into the 1st jhana, she told us to allow the breath to quieten enough to be practically unnoticeable, and then “put attention just in front of the nose or upper lip and pay attention the mental intention to breath in and out”. This means to shift the attentional awareness in such a way that the mental processes, nama, associated with breathing, are combined with a relaxed and investigative exploration of what might be noticeable, with eyes closed.

Doing this is subtle, a balancing of awareness that avoids being curious about physical sensations while intensely investigating what might appear subjectively in the blackness of the closed eyes, without any reference to external light sources. My experience of the nimitta occurred about halfway through the retreat. With enough patient and persistently relaxed attention I noticed that a fuzzy luminous phenomenon occurred, sometimes definable as a circle, but sometimes loosely shaped. Other time it seemed like looking at the eclipsed sun—a dark circle with a bright rim.

My experience of this was intermittent and unstable, likely because I was not yet skilled enough at balancing attention between the mental experience of breathing in and out and the nimitta—Shaila called this practice cultivating the “breath nimitta”. We are to focus undistracted attention for extended periods of time on this process, and eventually the subjective “blending” of the breath nimitta and the mental object will occur, providing entry into the 1st jhana.

I had an interesting experience of this state of consciousness without the nimitta during the retreat. During a Q & A session, a person reported the spontaneous arising of what he termed “an energy balloon” in the mind—not an image of a balloon, but an expansive energized state of mind that was physically relaxed, emotionally calm, and mentally “bright”. The next morning, during a 2 ½ hour sit, I experienced that phenomenon. The experience also included an awareness of piti (pee-tee) and sukkha (soo-kah), translated as joy and happiness. It only happened once during the retreat. Shaila called this *upacara samadhi* (ooh-pah-chah-rah sah-mah-dee), *access concentration*, the preliminary entry stage into the 1st jhana.

Upacara samadhi, access concentration, can also represent the quality of attention that is free from hindrances and preparatory for the full development of *vipassana* (vih-pah-sah-nah), *insight into the impermanent and impersonal nature of subjective experience*. The quality of clarity and serene nonreactivity that is cultivated during the experience of access concentration benefits the functioning of the Seven Awakening Factors: Mindfulness, Investigation of Mental Phenomena, Energy/Effort, Joy/Buoyancy, Tranquility, Concentration/Unification of Wholesome Mind Conditioners, and Equanimity/Balanced Application of the Awakening Factors. The goal of vipassana practice is direct experiential knowledge of the transitory nature of experience free of craving/clinging to the misperception of an enduring/autonomous self.